

Phantom Friendship in Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*

C. S. Schreiner

But I would not free myself so easily of phantoms, as some people all too often think they do (“it’s nothing but a phantom”). I think we are structured by the phantasmic, and in particular that we have a phantasmic relation to the other.—Jacques Derrida¹

The relationship with the Other is the absence of the other; not absence pure and simple, not the absence of pure nothingness, but absence in a horizon of the future, an absence that is time.—Emmanuel Levinas²

I now believe the Vietnam War drove us crazy.—Former Weatherman Mark Rudd³

I

The 1960s have always cast a minatory, multi-hued shadow over Robert Stone's *oeuvre*. Although he hung out with the Beats in Greenwich Village and later joined up with Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters while on a writing fellowship at Stanford, those readers seeking cheerful solidarity in Stone's work with the radical ethos of the Sixties will be confounded by his wariness and rigor. Even in his later works published in the 1980s and 90s, Stone's people are always getting into trouble, as if the “years of hope, days of rage” left them with a hangover from which they cannot recover. This is not always due to their personal flaws per se but because they don't easily conform to the unforeseeable political conservatism of the new era. To borrow a phrase of Perry Anderson, one of the “profoundly ambiguous

possible revolutionary outcomes" was that the old order did not fall after the uprisings of the Sixties, and survival became difficult for the rebel spirits who found themselves without a community. There are characters in Stone's work haunted by a sort of *untimely* energy of idealism. In some this errant energy merely ruins itself in decadence, but in others it becomes almost noble. In any case, recovery is highly problematical in Stone's work and remains one of his most intriguing themes. The stereotyping of the Sixties by the culture industry makes our reading of Stone's work all the more urgent, for he ceaselessly tests Sixties' assumptions and behaviors through the incidents and individuals portrayed in his fiction, providing glimpses of selves debilitated and in some cases strangely empowered by the strain of holding themselves together at volatile crossing points of cultural-political change. One gets the impression that Stone's personal philosophy is inspired by the restless energy in search of something different to believe in and different concepts of selfhood and culture that inspired the Sixties generation, but in his work the characters tend to unleash the unconscious sources of such energy, and suffer the consequences. Many of them are afflicted by episodes of self-indulgence, often alcoholic, angry, or desultory; lapses of vigilance that prove fatal; by fanaticism, and perhaps most troubling of all, by the weakening of conviction that leads to moral turpitude and nihilism. In this regard *decadence* fascinates Stone as it did Nietzsche. But here decadence does not only mean a decline of strong interpretation, a weakness of instinctual and philosophic vitality which prevents one from making decisive evaluations that fortify life and culture and further one's aesthetic or religious vision⁴. It more specifically implies a potential for dissociation, and therefore points obscurely to the problem of *community*, which, in addition to "recovery," is another difficult concept for Stone that he knows always risks becoming a slogan whether linked to LBJ's Great Society or People's Park in Berkeley. Todd Gitlin observes that the communal space of People's Park served as a concrete but fugitive answer to the question: "What do you people want?" (355). The key word here is *fugitive*: community was a dream of the Sixties that for complex reasons could only be realized fugitively, that different people had to *keep envisioning*. The democratic individualism that produced the best and the worst of the Sixties, that emboldened selfishness as much as

majestic generosity, spawned a freedom allergic to consensus. Wasn't this what was meant by the academic catchphrase "hermeneutics of suspicion"? Such would be the decadence, fueled by argument and poetry, of every countercultural movement that seeks to transgress or subvert the dominant system and ideology. Decadence would be the inclination of democracy to deconstruct itself through events by being open to chance and dreams, delaying its institutional perfection. As Collier and Horowitz have pointed out about the Sixties, "The decade ended with a big bang that made society into a collection of splinter groups" (15). They seem to regard this *splintering* as a scandal indicting the crazed inefficacy of the Sixties, but diversity is more true to the essence of democracy than the easy consensus sought by conservatives. In this regard, Jacques Derrida has spoken of an inevitable "politics of separation" (55) observing that democracy is always *coming*, on the way as it were, as a visionary and multicultural process. Robert Stone, like Derrida, doesn't speak often of "community" as such, but by throwing Ray Hicks and John Converse of *Dog Soldiers* on a mountain top where there was once a utopian commune and now a battlefield, he wants us to think about it through the struggles and visions of characters—one a skeptic, the other a good soldier—who were once comrades. It is their fraternity that is put in question by Stone, as something yet to come.

II

We are near the end of *Dog Soldiers* in a salty, sun-blasted place somewhere in the American southwest, "a grassless plain of mesquite and creosote bushes that stretched northward to the brown rims of the mountains. The outer ridges were steep and spired, capped with wind-worn fantasies that gave jagged edge to the horizon line." John Converse says to his wife, Marge, "The silence of it. It comes out of nothing to nowhere." Such an impersonal remark is curious given that they are waiting for a specific individual. The reference is to *a force or condition, not a person*. They have just escaped from corrupt federal agents thanks to the rearguard defensive action of Ray Hicks, a merchant seaman and former marine comrade of Converse. Hicks bought John and Marge time by staying behind and shooting it out with the Feds. These novice drug

smugglers have agreed to circle around the battle area and pick Hicks up in the Land Rover he gave them for their escape. They said they would come for him. It is the least they can do. Hicks has carried their illicit cargo, has been gravely damaged by an expanding bullet and is now trying to reconnoiter with them in the appointed place. Perversely, Converse, who initiated the deal, no longer even wants the dope Hicks carries. Moreover Converse does not care to see Hicks, before whose virility he feels only malice and an obscure envy. But as we will see, he misinterprets Hicks' virility. Let us first take a look at Converse's mental condition.

"There's nothing out here," Converse said. He was not certain what he meant by it. There was sand, and wind whipping the creosote and the shrouds of the jeep. There was the risk of cracking up. All real. He felt as though he had awakened from sleep to find himself driving within his own mind. (334)

The nothingness of the horizon correlates with the decadence of a man who has given up on himself and hence, can hardly believe in the strength of others. For the nonbeliever under duress, there is no refuge from the real; the unremitting emptiness of space backs Converse into himself, his own incapacity for imaginative projection. Fantasies have been exhausted, wind-worn. As for the force that is coming, "it" is invisible because it is too far away and because its powers are unimaginable, its phantasms inscrutable, to others moored in practical reality. Ray Hicks imagines love and friendship where there are none, and is coming to rejoin his friends in a phantom community.

Converse, when reminded by Marge of their obligation to pick up Hicks, replies "Even if we get that far...he won't be there. You must realize that." Converse repeats himself: "He won't be there." In all he repeats this confession of disbelief or lack of faith three times, but Marge refuses to accept it. She knows something about Hicks, having spent intimate time with him. He has the power to keep his promises. If he says he will meet them, then he will, she knows, do his best to meet them. When Converse, a fading intellectual and writer, once again scorns Hicks by saying "He's

not a sane person. And he's not very bright," Marge rebukes him by pointing out that Hicks came down from the mountaintop specifically to extricate Converse from the clutches of the federal agents, and that he could have chosen instead to flee in another direction with Marge, who had been with Hicks before the skirmish on the mountain. "He came down for you," she said. "That's why he came down. We could have gotten out." In reply, Converse says, "That can't be true." He cannot believe that Ray Hicks still upholds the Marine oath of *Semper Fidelis*. That oath is but an anachronism to Converse. Although he is a former Marine, his anti-war liberalism inhibits his ability to discern something worthy of respect in Hicks, who served *three terms* as a professional soldier. That repetition is one reason Converse calls him a "psychopath." But this stereotype overlooks the subtleties of Hicks' persona. He was by all means an excellent soldier during his three terms in Vietnam; "his disciplines had served him well." It follows that he suitably impressed his fellow soldiers, who were much younger than Hicks during his third term. "But it was not a war for a man who maintained a spiritual life, and who had taken an Asian wife," Stone tells us. "Many marines there were stronger against it than he; he declined to speak against war, any war. Yet people in the line who had come to hate the nature of the thing did not hesitate to talk to him about it. When one of the regimental communications companies in the grip of dope spirituality formed itself as a commune and declared for Joan Baez, the kids in it expected a certain sympathy from him" (75). Two attributes are highlighted in this description. One, Hicks quietly refuses to hypocritically condemn war as such while serving as a soldier, which would only weaken the format of his will and group combat effectiveness. His spiritual bearing, informed by what he conceives as samurai codes, maintains a formal distance from the detestable politics of the Vietnam conflict. And two, there is something in Hicks' comportment of youthful intensity and irreverence, perhaps what Converse refers to as "adolescence" when mocking Hicks' fondness for Nietzsche, that moves the younger and disenchanted soldiers to expect "a certain sympathy from him." Indeed, Nietzsche would say that as an artist of himself, Hicks embodies "a kind of youth and spring, a kind of habitual intoxication" (*Will to Power* 801). This would be a feature intrinsically attractive to

disillusioned soldiers. As Josiah Royce says of the Japanese samurai in *his The Philosophy of Loyalty*, “He made much, even childlike, display of dignity” (Furukawa 236). As we will see, what Converse isn’t willing to comprehend is that self-discipline does not exclude joyful wisdom, and that a soldier like Hicks is empowered by a kind of aesthetic philosophical vision that is neither profound nor “intellectual” in a form recognizable to Converse.

We first see a display of samurai spirit in the embarkation scene of the novel, when Hicks practices his blend of Tai Chi and karate on the flight deck of the ship on which he smuggles the dope for Marge and Converse. He also plays chess at night with the civilians on board, after which he drinks tea and retires early to bed. After having spent some years in Japan during which he came to marry a Japanese woman and study Zen, Japan became “immensely important to him,” and Hicks has come to “to think of himself as a kind of samurai” (75); one who mixes his Zen with readings of Nietzsche. The embarkation scene, sparsely depicting Hicks’ cool asceticism in the novel, takes on a portentous but bracing dimension in the film version scripted by Stone, for the sincerity with which Hicks (Nick Nolte) practices his *kata* on deck is amplified by the breathtaking panorama of what we are to imagine as the South China Sea, and its associated oceanic feelings. Having left Converse’s fear and loathing of philosophy behind, we are suddenly invigorated by Hicks’ display of martial artistry. “At last the horizon seems open once more...every hazard is again permitted to the discernor, and the sea, our sea, again lies open before us,” Nietzsche says. “There is yet another world to be discovered—and more than one! Embark, philosophers!” In the context of Nietzsche’s theme of embarkation, we can suggest that when Hicks practices his martial art, he is not demonstrating his mastery of a specific *kata* but showing us that he has a philosophy or aesthetic of self. In the film version it is immaterial whether Nick Nolte is successfully mimicking the style of martial art X or Y. Indeed, from the point of view of today’s viewer, saturated with Jackie Chan films, such a scene could be taken as parody or cliché. This too is immaterial with regard to the significance of the scene, *which affords us a glimpse of Hicks’ self-understanding*. We will have occasion to remark more than once that this self-understanding is

skin deep. Hicks, concretely poised and imaginatively projecting, feels his bodily power and confidence *as* the philosophical justification of his destiny, in contrast to Converse's decadence. He is preparing for his destiny: the format of his will is not to be broken until death. "He is a man of his word; he has the right to make promises because he has the power to keep them. The power to remember one's word, to make and keep promises, is the power to dominate and command one's own future" (Lingis 55).

III

Ray Hicks is singing, but he is still too remote for Marge and John to hear him. He is singing various tried-and-true marine lyrics to stay on course, to put one leg before the other while bleeding to death in the sun-blasted canyon. As we said above, Converse, who has given up on truth after his experiences in Vietnam, cannot comprehend Hicks' personal mode of *being true* to his friends. Marge tells her husband that what Hicks' has done is "something simple." "He's not a sane person," she confers, "And he's not very bright. Sometimes...people do simpleminded things like that. They take a chance to help their friends." Then she asks her husband: "Can't you respond to that?" But the very forthrightness of Hicks' loyalty, which in their recently dire circumstances necessitated violent protective action, is precisely what has been, for Converse, deconstructed in Vietnam and exposed for its hypocrisy, its lack of principles. "One thing I hate," he tells Marge, "is tough-mindedness" (332). This opinion is continuous with what we know about Converse's self-image. Since the beginning of the novel he has identified himself with fear, epitomized in his confession: "I am afraid, therefore I am" (42). Charmian, his drug connection in Vietnam, says "John, you're the world's most frightened man. I don't know how you live with yourself" (11). Yet Converse's rewording of Descartes *cogito, ergo sum* is less about fear than his disbelief in the power of ideas to format or stylize a life. His sarcastic opinion of philosophy is openly announced when Converse laughs at Hicks' *Portable Nietzsche*, which the latter began reading twelve years ago. Although Converse himself encouraged Hicks to read Nietzsche when they were young marines together in Yokasuka, Japan, he is incredulous that

Hicks still fervently abides by Nietzschean thought.

The origin of Converse's skepticism is revealed in an absurd anecdote. Elephants were destroyed from the air when the U.S. military suspected the docile animals might be harboring enemy munitions. This surreal event wipes out his belief in the war effort and in any other forms of belief except capitalism conceived as personal avidity. It is his newborn nihilism that provokes Converse's fascination with a middle-aged missionary woman who shares his park bench as the novel opens. Her faith, evinced in the stubborn persistence of her bond to a village on the Cambodian border from which her husband has already been kidnapped and murdered, casts a spell on Converse in the course of their conversation. He becomes perversely fascinated with her fearless composure and dignity, an unflinching impetus that even her husband's death does not halt. The perverse element, for Converse, is in the missionary's responsibility beyond reason, her self-sacrifice. "We're never satisfied," she says to him. "We always want to do more" (6). When he suggests that they get together for drinks and supper later that evening because "it would be interesting," she dismisses his pass at her with the obscure remark, "We don't need interesting things...That's not what we need" (9). Like Ray Hicks, her faith is not intellectual. While his allegiance is to the mission at hand, the task of smuggling for his friends, and hers is to the sacred, both of them fit Bataille's description of the sovereign type who is not fainthearted, who is indifferent to death, and for whom sovereignty is not knowledge (222). Converse, the fainthearted one, becomes engrossed with what is absent in himself: the missionary has a "cause," while he seems bereft of even the utopian revolutionary fervor that animates the 1960s counterculture for which he writes journalism. Converse worries incessantly about his health. Before sitting down, he meticulously checks the bench in Saigon for "unpleasant substances," although he has already decided to smuggle an extremely dangerous substance, heroin, to California, where it will typically seep, through planned and unforeseen power networks, into the social infrastructures of supply, demand and addiction. The disjunction between Converse's personal hygiene ("it was his nature to worry about his health") and the villainous smuggling operation in which he is about to get involved (and sure to spill into American family life as the film "Traffic"

has compellingly shown) epitomizes Converse's state of dissociation. Little does he know that the heroin will be used by his wife, who is supposed to conclude the illicit transaction in the States by transferring the dope to dealers, and that when the deal goes bad it will endanger their family. The risks of his undertaking have not been thought through by Converse. His moral and intellectual convictions have apparently been so shattered by the Vietnam War that he has been backed up into a frightened posture of self-protection and gain without concern for the welfare of those closest to him. His decision to smuggle the dope is based on a cynical feeling that he is finally doing something real, something profitable. In this refuge of personal profit (the *only reality*) and subversion of social welfare, Robert Stone anticipates the survival tactic of those who made it alive from the 1960s into the years of Reaganomics so perversely called the Reagan Revolution. Idealism gives way to practical inwardness and instincts of profit and self-preservation. But there is also, as Jean Baudrillard would put it, nostalgia for reality in Converse's wayward actions. Vietnam, as Baudrillard has argued, was already a sort of simulacrum produced by the media when Converse arrives there. The absurdity of some of his claims about simulacra should not dissuade us from appreciating Baudrillard's basic insight that media coverage makes it very difficult to find an original or "real" version of events. Before coming to Vietnam, Converse worked at a tabloid magazine that exaggerates the unsavory topics of traditional tabloids, in short, a simulacrum of tabloid reporting. His writing assignments there increased his difficulties with reality and "led Converse to a Schizophrenic Episode" (23). Subsequently he sought a reporting assignment in Vietnam for *the purpose of a reality test*. He went to Vietnam seeking reality and identity, a sort of opportunity for self-discovery. The smuggling misadventure that ensues, in which an American realizes his limitations by garishly messing up in *some one else's backyard*, unconsciously replicates the American intervention in Vietnam. Only Ray Hicks, who has over the years developed a relationship with Asians that is not insincere, remarks the unfair selfishness in this kind of American self-discovery when he coolly says to Converse, "Too bad for the gooks." Hicks himself, as we have seen, deals with Vietnam on a much more imaginative or "pathological" level suited to its phantasmal, media-

contrived qualities. An eye for an eye, an illusion for an illusion.

Thus it is not out of respect that Converse is attracted to the missionary. His fascination arises out of the contrast between his own postmodern incredulity and her sanctimony; and from his feeling that her zeal is a pathological exception, something freakish or monstrous. Like Mary Urquhart in Robert Stone's later story, "Miserere," the appearance of faith in contemporary culture borders on monstrosity. Stone asks: *What does faith look like, and What does it take (demand of me by way of self-discipline or delusion) to believe?* It appears to onlookers that faith is fanatical, hence a form of madness. But with events out of control all around, response tactics would also seem to be insane. One is confronted with greater and lesser, mainstream or marginal, traditional and counter-cultural modes of madness. Instrumental reason, invoked in logistical bombing of civilian populations, elephants, and primordial forests, is but another mode of madness.

The initial encounter between Converse and the missionary foreshadows the cynical attitude he will adopt toward Ray Hicks. Converse's derisive appraisal of Hicks focuses on his "tough-mindedness" but this catchword really implies his soldier's discipline and faith (*Semper Fi*). As we said, Converse finds Hicks' intensity of focus so peculiar as to call him a "psychopath" behind his back to a mutual American acquaintance. This betrayal, if only in words, hurts Ray Hicks when he hears of it. "You bad mouth me. You threaten me with the fucking CIA and claim you turned me. Then when you need honesty and self-discipline you come to me" (55). He is also hurt "by Converse's sneering at his copy of Nietzsche." Yet even as he reminds himself of Converse's hypocrisy, Hicks will affirm in his death-bound hallucinatory last thoughts his love for his friends, *whose pain he wishes to absorb into his own*. Converse is one of the only people for whom Hicks has felt "anything like love," and he doesn't drop him even when rebuked. The tough-mindedness that Hicks evinces is not a narrow pragmatism hidden within a muscular format impervious to the needs of others, for he has all along become *more exposed* not only to danger but in his capacity to be affected, an altruism or inclusiveness for feeling the pain of those he loves. Levinas speaks of such an altruism when he remarks, "The fullness of power in which the sovereignty of the

I maintains itself extends to the Other, not in order to conquer it, but to support it...This election signifies the most radical commitment there is, total altruism" (*Proper Names* 74).

IV

Converse and Marge finally arrive at the turning point, where they transect an old railroad bed, at which point they are to follow the rails until they encounter Hicks. Converse gets out of the Land Rover and surveys the area, in what becomes one of the most haunting scenes in post-1960s American fiction.

Converse stopped the car and climbed out. There was no one in sight, no other cars on the road in either direction. He leaned his folded arms on the square hood and put his head down.

"Listen to it," he said, when he raised his head again, "it's incredible."

Marge shook her head impatiently.

"What?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"The silence of it," he said. "It comes out of nothing to nowhere."

Marge got out and looked down the line of tracks.

"He's walking out there."

"I don't believe it, do you?"

"Yes," she said.

Marge is right, Hicks is coming, but still out of sight. He comes out of nowhere like a force, a derelict locomotive running out of fuel. She believes he is coming. This is not "faith in mankind" or any such universal renewal of belief. Nor does Marge think Hicks is a saint. But his character has instilled her with a very specific—absolutely particular—respect for his absolutely particular power to keep a promise.

Hicks has just come down from a mountain that used to be the location of a commune and retreat where he spent some time in the early 1960s, but which just now became a battle zone when the Feds tried to ambush the drug smugglers. It is noteworthy that Hicks returns to the site of his

former community for refuge. He no longer belongs to a tribe or battalion, and his solitude is striking even when he is with others. Yet for a brief moment before the battle with the Feds, Hicks and Marge bask in the sun on the mountaintop as if Vietnam had never tainted the "tantalizing glimpses of the New Jerusalem" afforded by the Sixties (Collier and Horowitz). The film version of *Dog Soldiers* (titled "Who Will Stop the Rain?") poignantly underscores the utopian moment in the dancing of Marge and Hicks on the mountaintop. As if, after all, paradise still furtively opens and access is only a question of one's powerful feelings to believe in it, in the fantasy. "Has it not grown colder?" asks Nietzsche's Zarathustra in the famous text cited by Hicks. The fugitive community that briefly assembles on the mountain is the impossible one that Hicks has sought to construct out of the power of illusion, and that he seeks to defend against the coldness of the culture that awaits them. He does so out of a "sovereign exigency...which calls for the impossible coming true, in the reign of the moment" (Bataille 211).

Hicks injects some of the heroin he carries for his friends to alleviate the pain of his wound. He has carried the heroin for them all the way from Vietnam, and does not drop it even in death. It has always been a matter of carrying the weight for an old friend, John Converse, and the weight only became heavier as Hicks fell in love with Marge, resisted the interdiction and "deals" of the authorities, whose game he refused to play, and finally dehydrates in the salt flats. Yet he refuses to lighten his load. "Without the weapon, without the pack, things would be so much easier. He recalled that the pack was what he wanted so he would have to carry it. *Serious people existed in order to want things, and to carry them*" (322 emphasis added). When Hicks was assigned to fight in a hopeless battle in Vietnam as punishment for being lenient with his men by letting them see Bob Hope's traveling show, he somehow survived, continued to carry his rifle in the face of unjustly high casualties all around him; and likewise now, in the face of absurd chances, he defiantly refuses to back down, to cringe and drop his load. It is not chance that he defies, for he embraces chance, but he defies the slackness of being that would allow him to abandon his promise. It is not duty as such that imperatively animates Hicks in his death march, but an insatiable desire for more responsibility,

more weight, correlative with his sense of loyalty and love. "When you have encountered a human being," Levinas says, "you cannot drop him. Most often we do so, saying 'I have done all I could!' We haven't done anything!" (*Alterity and Transcendence* 106). This is Hicks' fate, *not to drop his load*, not to break his promise, and he loves it: *amor fati*.

At first Hicks wanted to take the chance of carrying the weight because Converse was an old friend and because "he felt the necessity of changing levels"; the challenge of carrying the dope would elevate his feelings, "a little adrenalin to clean the blood" (55). But his involvement with Marge, who bungles the transfer of dope and falls under the wing of Hicks as he refuses to compromise with the Feds and handles the dope on his own terms, becomes something fateful for Hicks. He reconfirms or updates or *refreshes* his fate, his will-to-chance, through his relationship to Marge. Holed up in a motel room where Hicks is deciding how to dispense with the heroin, he is at first tempted to flee and rid himself of his double burden of the dope and Marge. But he decides to mobilize his forces for her and bind himself to an illusion worthy of a serious man:

In the end there were not many things worth wanting—for the serious man, the samurai. But there were some. In the end, if the serious man is still bound to illusion, he selects the worthiest illusion and takes a stand. The illusion might be of waiting for one woman to come under his hands. Of being with her and shivering in the same moment. If I walk away from this, he thought, I'd be an old man—all ghosts and hangovers and mellow recollections. Fuck it, he thought, follow the blood. This is the one. This is the one to ride until it crashes (168).

With Hicks we are in the presence of someone for whom illusion is a powerful means for staying the course, for staying on course. During his death march he uses it to stay upright and resist his pain. He creates a blue triangle against the base of his skull, with a deep black background, and "at the heart of the triangle, he introduced a bright red circle and within the circle he concentrated his pain...He was glad to be alone. The triangle held and his legs with it" (308-9). Converse's disrespect for what

he perceives as Hicks' apparent prowess in practical action is a skeptical refusal of and jealous reaction to Hicks' powers of sympathy and imagination, his will-to-illusion. What Converse really disrespects in Hicks is his obscure moral imagination, which is outside the traditional psychology to which Converse has tried to make it conform in his condemnation of the "psychopath." Although old-fashioned morality has collapsed for Converse, his psychological discrimination exposes his secret foothold in the old order. A new ethic has evolved since the death of absolute truth in Vietnam, if not in Auschwitz, based on the *particular absolute*, according to Slavoj Zizek, but Converse has not made the leap out of nihilism into the creatively evolving morality that Hicks embodies:

...avoid as much as possible any violation of the fantasy space of the other, i.e., respect as much as possible the other's "particular absolute," the way he organizes his universe of meaning in a way particular to him. Such an ethic is neither imaginary (the point is not to love our neighbor as ourselves, insofar as he resembles ourselves, i.e., insofar as we see in him an image of ourselves) nor symbolic (the point is also not to respect the other on account of the dignity bestowed on him by his symbolic identification, by the fact that he belongs to the same symbolic community as ourselves, even if we conceive this community in the widest possible sense and maintain respect for him "as a human being"). What confers on the other the dignity of a "person" is not any universal-symbolic feature but precisely what is "absolutely particular" about him, his fantasy, that part of him that we can be sure we can never share. To use Kant's terms: we do not respect the other in account of the universal moral law inhabiting every one of us, but on account of his utmost "pathological" kernel, on account of the absolutely particular way every one of us "dreams his world," organizes his enjoyment... (156-157)

By cynically dismissing Hicks as "pathological," Converse consistently overlooks the dignity of his private moral vision, his destiny based on illusion. Ray Hicks is neither particularly intelligent nor moral by ordi-

nary standards. One could not sincerely call him profound; it is in his shallowness that philosophy merges with aesthetic vision. His philosophy is skin deep. The enduring strength of Hicks' situation is precisely due to its imaginative projections that stylize the format of his will as a samurai. The striking format of that will, which expires in a display of solar sovereignty as his body subsides against a rail track running to a vanishing point in the horizon, contrasts with the prevailing atmosphere of nihilism and sarcastic defeatism that enshrouds the opening sections of *Dog Soldiers*. As we have seen, this difference between Converse and Hicks is that between a skeptical realist and someone who uses the power of illusion to bolster the format of his will into a strange loyalty. Their contrast is all the more ironic insofar as Converse is supposed to be the creative writer who supports imaginative efforts, and Hicks (his name implying the country "hick") the simple-minded merchant seaman.

V

Pervasive nihilism, taken in like a narcotic in the heyday of the 1960s' Vietnam conflict, seemed to relieve many individuals of the burden of adopting a standpoint. But this response is a misprision of nihilism as such. Even *within* nihilism, as Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* shows, positions are assumed, decisions made, with greater and lesser degrees of resolve and intensity, ambiguity and inanity. There are still impulses of affirmation. It pays to recall Nietzsche's admonition that nihilism is not a goal but a stage: the stage of self-overcoming, the destructive stage preceding metamorphosis. The goal is incessant metamorphosis—a mobile thought grounded in the healthy affirmation of one's body and the use of imagination. And what is the concrete means to that goal? Ray Hicks' form of art, "combat." And yet the specific format of Hicks' will contrasts with the atmosphere of nihilism characteristic of the Vietnam era. To be sure, Hicks' pledge of phantom friendship, or ethic of illusion, is carried out in such a ruthless manner as to suggest that it is not the opposite of nihilism but rather seems to arise from within it. Let us recall that he is a drug smuggler and a killer. Are these not decadent behaviors? While the "impetus of a sovereign man makes a killer of him," according to Bataille (220), we have to recall that unlike the missionary, Hicks is not

sacrificing himself (or others) for religion. In this regard Bataille claims that sovereignty has *many forms*. So does decadence. Hicks' sovereignty is as different from the missionary's as his decadence is from that of Converse. All of them are democratic individualists. Their different viewpoints, from weak to fanatical, represent the splintering of consensus on the Left that marked the end of the Sixties revolution and made room for a Right that achieves consensus all too easily. The decadence of Converse would be what Nietzsche described in contrast to the overflowing bodily vigor of the aesthetic: "the weary, the exhausted, the dried up (e.g., the scholars)" who "do not possess the primary artistic force, the pressure of abundance: whoever cannot give, also receives nothing" (*Will to Power* 801). Hicks, who we have already depicted as a kind of hybrid samurai and Nietzschean aesthetic, a giver, must be seen frankly in the framework of his final hours as *fallen sovereignty*: bleeding to death, laced with bullets and heroin, hallucinating. The final hallucination scene before Hicks perishes, which is as stunningly majestic as it is lengthy, supports Bataille's claim that "In the world of fallen sovereignty, only the imagination has sovereign moments available to it" (256). Everything has become illusion for Hicks, whose ethic was based on imagining the time when "one woman would come under his hands." His death-bound fantasy joins those cut by the wind into the surrounding mountains. But his singing, soldierly rigor of final steps is peculiarly affirmative. He drops dead with his illicit cargo just before John and Marge arrive. Is his mission not completed, and has he not carried out, however obscurely, an imperative true to the spirit of the revolutionary Sixties? *All you need is love*. He empowered himself with an avowal of love to Marge that was an illusion and that he kept to himself. Hence he follows through in utter solitude, his only company being his phantom friends who wait for him at a distance. It is in this distance that his illusion of friendship and his soldierly honor is preserved until his last dying breath. "Over the abyss, on the shifting ground of our friendships," Derrida argues, an imaginative politics is necessary. He cites Nietzsche: "how uncertain is the ground upon which all our alliances and friendships rest...how isolated each man is." Then Derrida concludes, "That is why friendship had better preserve itself in silence, and keep silent about truth" (53).

Notes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*: 89.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*: 90.
- 3 Collier and Horowitz, *Destructive Generation*: 241.
- 4 According to Eric Blondel, Nietzsche borrowed the term “decadence” from the French language, in which it still “conforms to its Latin etymology in designating above all the physical falling of buildings, bodies and, in the figurative sense, the falling, or rather, decline or decay (an interesting doublet reserved for the biological body) of institutions and civilizations.” Blondel goes on to make the following distinction in Nietzsche’s creative analysis of decadence: “In preference to *Verfall* (decline), the German equivalent, Nietzsche therefore adopts decadence in order to designate the decline of a culture as a set of evaluative bodies-spirits, but notes as he does so the bodily aspect of the weakness of groups of individuals when faced with a life which they confront and interpret. Decadence is a weak *vital interpretation* in which the organism moves towards its fall and its end. Curiously, it is a historic notion, without any precise physiological connotation, which is used to present an idea of cultural degradation that rests on illness in the instincts. Nietzsche, adopting a term that is used abstractly, gives it life and a body via the imaginary, and this is what distinguishes it from a concept like corruption or depravation (the progressive postponement perfection, a downward trend) such as one finds in Rousseau” (253).

Works Cited

- Anderson, Perry. “Modernity and Revolution”, *The New Left Review* 144 (March-April 1984): 96-113.
- Bataille, Georges. *The Accursed Share*, Vol. II & III, trans. Robert Hurley. Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, MIT Press, 1991.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.
- Blondel, Eric. *Nietzsche: The Body and Culture*, trans. Sean Hand. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991.
- Collier, Peter, and Horowitz, David. *Destructive Generation*. New York: Summit Books, 1989.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997.
- . *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

- Furukawa, Tesshi. "The Individual in Japanese Ethics", *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. Charles A. Moore. Honolulu: U. Hawaii P, 1967.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam Books, 1987.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987 (orig. 1947).
- . *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- . *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael Smith. New York: Columbia UP, 1999.
- Lingis, Alphonso. "The Will to Power", *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David Allison. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1974. (orig. 1887).
- . *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking, 1954.
- . *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage, 1968.
- Stone, Robert. *Dog Soldiers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1987 (orig. 1974).
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1992.